

**AT THE ROOTS OF FAITH:
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE HISTORY AND APPEAL OF
BUDDHISM AND CHRISTIANITY IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA**

by
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ABSTRACT

MEGAN ROGERS: *At the Roots of Faith: A Comparative Analysis of the History and Appeal of Buddhism and Christianity in Contemporary China*
(Under the direction of Professor Gang Guo)

In the late 1970s, China emerged from its Cultural Revolution as a society ostensibly free from religion. In the subsequent years, however, religious belief has grown at an astounding rate, so much so that by the year 2005, around 31.4% of Chinese adults identified themselves as religious. Given the size of China's population, this percentage translates to over three hundred million believers. Perhaps most remarkably, not only traditional religions such as Buddhism but foreign ones—Protestantism in particular—have reflected this increase. Such rapid growth has often astonished observers and left them struggling to explain the phenomenon: in a largely secular society with an atheistic government, what is attracting people to religion?

The Chinese government recognizes five official religions—Buddhism, Daoism, Protestantism, Catholicism, and Islam—but I have focused my study on only three of these: Buddhism, Protestantism, and Catholicism. Buddhism is currently China's largest religion and remains its most influential. Protestantism has been the fastest growing religion over the past three decades, and both Chinese and foreign scholars have performed extensive research on the phenomenon. Finally, while Catholicism lacks both Buddhism's prestige and Protestantism's growth, to many Western observers it remains closely linked with Protestantism, with the two religions often being discussed together as "Christianity."

While many scholars provided various explanations for this remarkable growth over the last thirty years, very few appear to have actually tested these hypotheses against statistical data. I have, therefore, selected nine of the hypotheses, which fall into two broad theories, and attempt to test their validity using the *1993 Survey on Social Mobility and Social Change in China*, a country-wide probability survey that includes a question about religious belief. I have divided this thesis into two parts: the first section compares the history of these three religions since the Chinese Communist Party took power in 1949, while the second section uses statistical data from the 1993 survey to test the validity of the nine different hypotheses about the appeal of religion in post-Mao China. The analysis of these hypotheses shows that while China's religious are largely young and female, from rural areas and with low-levels of education, religious believers are actually, on the whole, little different from the general population.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CBA	Chinese Buddhist Association
CCC	China Christian Council
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCTV	China Central Television
CPA	Catholic Patriotic Association
GMD	Chinese Nationalist Party (Guomindang/Kuomintang)
PRC	People's Republic of China
RAB	Religious Affairs Bureau
SARA	State Administration for Religious Affairs
TSPM	Christian Three-Self Patriotic Movement

INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of religiosity in China since Deng Xiaoping's reforms in the late 1970s has led to much speculation about the nature of this phenomenon and its implications for the country's communist government. Far less attention, however, has been paid to the appeal of religion to masses at this time in the nation's history. After all, the ten years of the Cultural Revolution, along with many of Mao Zedong's previous campaigns, essentially destroyed all outward expressions of religious belief, teaching that religion was both feudalistic and backwards. With such a tumultuous recent history, why are so many of the Chinese people now being drawn to religion? What appeal do these religions hold for them? Are the reasons for religious conversion constant among the different religions or do they vary? These sorts of questions need to be asked to fully understand the rise of religion in post-Mao China and its place in current Chinese society.

The official religions

The Chinese government recognizes five official religions: Buddhism, Catholicism, Daoism, Islam, and Protestantism. Of these five religions, Buddhism, Catholicism, and Protestantism stand out: Buddhism remains the country's largest religion, both in numbers and in organization, while Protestantism's growth outpaces that of all the other religions, so much so that many have described the development as "Christianity fever" (Hunter and Chan 4). Catholicism lacks Protestantism's impressive growth, but it remains, to the average Western reader, so intimately linked with Protestantism that the two religions are often discussed together as "Christianity" in much

of the non-academic literature.¹ Islam, on the other hand, remains largely a minority religion with little appeal to the Han majority, and Daoism, while being the only native Chinese religion, has neither Buddhism's influence nor Christianity's growth. Buddhism, Catholicism, and Protestantism, therefore, appear to be the most relevant and prominent religions in China today, so my research focuses on history and appeal of these three religions and whatever parallels can be drawn among them. With each of these religions gaining a larger foothold in Chinese society, the reasons behind their popularity cannot be ignored.

Why focus on the appeal of religion?

Why is the issue of the appeal of religions important? After all, religious belief is an intensely private matter, and each person has his own reasons for his faith. In a place such as China, however, the forms of religious expression seen today were practically non-existent just a little over three decades ago. While some followers most likely hid their belief during the Cultural Revolution and are now merely speaking openly of it, most are converts not raised in their religious tradition, and their individual reasons for conversion, when considered together, can provide insight into the concerns of average citizens in post-Mao China.

Much research has been done on China's religious revival, with most seeming to center on Christianity's surprising gains in followers. While many of the scholars, in the process of their research, may touch upon the appeal of this or that religion, works that actually test the various hypotheses and their validity using statistical data have been

¹ To the Chinese, however, these religions are generally regarded as separate; the word 基督教, for example, is most often translated as "Christianity" in the foreign media, but in Chinese literature it refers only to Protestantism.

rather scarce and limited. Furthermore, the surveys discussed in most texts on religion in China were conducted on a small scale and fail to provide an accurate representation of religious belief in the country as a whole. My research is intended to fill this gap, testing nine hypotheses that I found to be the most commonly stated, most interesting, or most logical about the appeal of religion against the results from the *1993 Survey on Social Mobility and Social Change*, with the results then being updated and expanded using information from a report on a 2005 survey of religious belief in China.

Research methods

This paper is focused around the *1993 Survey on Social Mobility and Social Change*, which Professor Tianjian Shi of Duke University conducted in 1993. The survey's 3287 respondents provide a probability sample of the mainland Chinese population at that time. Since every person over the age of eighteen living in all provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities except for Tibet had the same probability of being selected to be interviewed, the results of this survey offer an extremely accurate illustration of Chinese society in 1993.² Of these 3287 respondents, 10.7%, a total of 352 people, identified themselves as believers in one of the country's five official religions. Of these, 72% are Buddhist, 5% are Catholic, and 10% are Protestant. Translated to the country's then-population of 1.185 billion (National Bureau), China would have had nearly 126.7 million religious followers, with about ninety-one million Buddhists, six million Catholics, and 12.7 million Protestants.

² A more detailed explanation of the techniques used to conduct this survey can be found in Chen, Xueyi, and Tianjian Shi, "Media Effects on Political Confidence and Trust in the People's Republic of China in the Post-Tiananmen Period," *East Asia* 19.3 (Fall 2001), 84-118.

Unfortunately, no similar studies are available from more recent years, although in 2005 professors at East China Normal University began a three year survey on religious belief in China that involved over 4500 participants. This survey's data, however, has not been released to the public, so I am only able to supplement the results from the 1993 Survey with information from the February 28, 2007, article that Sun Yiwei published in *Eastern Watch Weekly* entitled "Survey of the Chinese people's current religious beliefs (当代中国人宗教信仰调查)." However, without more information about the survey, we have no way of knowing whether the methods used to select participants to interview resulted in a sample as representative as the one in the 1993 survey. Nonetheless, this work provides an updated view of the state of religion in China and illustrates some changes that have occurred in the intervening twelve years. For example, the survey reveals that 31.4% of the Chinese population, over three hundred million people, now profess belief in religion. 67.4% of these people—which translates to at least two hundred million—believe in one of the five official religions, an increase of at least eighty million over the amount reported in 1993. The other one hundred million or so people are involved in traditional forms of worship, such as ancestor worship, that the government does not officially sanction.

The majority of the hypotheses covered in this paper have been gleaned from various texts discussing religion in contemporary China, with two books in particular forming the foundation of many of the arguments: Alan Hunter and Kim-Kwong Chan's *Protestantism in Contemporary China* and Luo Zhufeng's *Religion under Socialism in China* both include sections that specifically discuss the appeal of religion to people in

China today,³ and the results from various small-scale surveys that they conducted substantiate many of their claims. Dr. Jane Wu introduced me to this topic as part of my “Religion in Contemporary China” course at Zhejiang University of Technology in Hangzhou, China, and she provided me with most of the Chinese documents, including the report on the 2005 survey. Professor Gang Guo, my thesis advisor, encouraged me to use the 1993 survey as the foundation of this paper and taught me the statistical analysis skills necessary for testing the validity of the various hypotheses.

³ On page 169, Hunter and Chan include a table that lists various reasons “for conversion to or continued adherence to religions in modern China,” while Luo’s fourth chapter, “Reasons for the Persistence of Religion,” provides various traditional, social, and psychological sources of religious belief.

PART ONE: THE HISTORY OF RELIGION IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

When the Chinese Communist Party [CCP] gained control of China in 1949, it inherited the country's religious masses, a diverse group whose beliefs placed them at odds with the Party's avowed atheism. Nonetheless, despite viewing religion to be feudalistic and often subject to imperial control, the CCP recognized that it was a social phenomenon which could not immediately be eliminated, and the constitution of the People's Republic of China, in its various incarnations, has assured citizens of their freedom of religious belief or disbelief. While this protection has been guaranteed at least in name for most of the PRC's history, during the 1966-1976 period of the Cultural Revolution, the Party prescribed to a strict Marxist view that religion is "the opium of the people," interpreting the phrase to mean religious belief should be stamped out. As a result, the government removed the religious freedom clause from the constitution and persecuted believers far more severely than they had in previous years (Dillon 5). With the implementation of Deng Xiaoping's "Reforms and Openness" (改革开放) programs in 1978, however, religious activities resumed and in many instances surpassed pre-Cultural Revolution levels.

Freedom of religious belief in China, on the other hand, takes on a guise quite different from that seen in the West. Article 36 of the country's most recent constitution, adopted in 1982, specifies that religious belief must be expressed as "normal" religious activity, cannot be used to "disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens, or interfere

with the educational system of the state,” and must be free from any “foreign domination” (*Constitution*). The government’s definition of “normal” religious activity is the worship of one of the country’s five official religions: Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism. Furthermore, after the CCP established the Religious Affairs Bureau [RAB], now called the State Administration for Religious Affairs [SARA],⁴ in the 1950s, the government used this organization to regulate all forms of official religious activity.⁵ Religious bodies are required to register themselves and their sites of worship with SARA, and these groups must have the government’s recognition as a “legitimate” branch of one of the five official religions to legally be allowed to convene (Sang 47-50). While the Chinese government claims that SARA exists to protect citizens’ freedom of religious belief, any religious body or individual whose beliefs do not fit the standards of “normal” religion run the risk of being labeled and persecuted as a cult (Information). The most famous case in recent years is that of Falun Gong: in 1998 the government labeled this quasi-qigong practice a cult and outlawed it. Despite both internal and international outcry over the decision, Falun Gong remains illegal in China, and activist groups often point to the government’s crackdown on the so-called “cult” as a prime example of the country’s violation of religious freedom and human rights.

Despite the government’s restrictions on religion, the numbers of those professing religious belief have continued to rise over the past three decades. The Cultural Revolution destroyed all outward displays of religion, but religious adherents now make up an estimated 31.4% of the population, which translates to over three hundred million people (Sun). The majority of these people, around two hundred million, believe in

⁴ The Chinese name for SARA is 国家宗教事务局.

⁵ Keeping in line with the government’s denial of the necessity of religion, however, the RAB was disbanded during the Cultural Revolution.

Buddhism, Daoism, or other native Chinese religions (*Ibid.*), but the sheer size of the Chinese population still means that the country has more Catholics than Ireland and that their Protestant community is the second-largest in the world, behind only that of the United States (Kindopp 1-2). Neither should the Muslim population, although they are concentrated mainly in minority regions, be disregarded—they number around twenty million and have more than forty thousand places of worship (United States). This rapid rise of religion, Christianity in particular, has surprised and baffled both government officials and scholars. The so-called “Christianity fever” that began in the 1980s was especially unexpected since missionaries, in the years before the founding of the PRC, were allowed to proselytize freely but gained only a few million converts. In the past thirty years, however, the Christian community has grown to at least forty million followers, with many estimates being much higher, even though evangelizing remains illegal (Sun).

Much of this religious growth has been in underground communities that fail to register with SARA and submit to government regulation. The government, in turn, tends to regard these groups as “unpatriotic” and “potentially subversive” and has suppressed them with varying levels of severity, once again earning the CCP much condemnation from the international community (Dillon 2). On the other hand, after the end of the Cultural Revolution, the government worked to re-establish religious rights, and it summarized its new policy on religion in Document 19, issued in 1982, which stated that freedom of religious belief should be protected, “pending such future time when religion itself will disappear” (Potter 13). Despite the government’s increased openness toward religion, religious groups were still prohibited from gaining “feudal

privileges,” and their ability to proselytize and raise money was severely limited. At the same time, the government pledged to continue promoting atheism, and Party members were banned from being religious (14). Although the CCP believed that “religion continues to exist in China [merely] because ‘the people’s consciousness lags behind social realities,’” attempting to eliminate it would be “completely wrong,” which was one of the major mistakes of the Cultural Revolution (qtd in Janz 141). The government emphasized that all Chinese people, both atheist and religious, should form a “united front” in creating a socialist society (*Ibid.*), a philosophy that they had focused on in the 1950s with the establishment of a United Front Work Department—under which the RAB had been formed—that worked to integrate all of the country’s minorities into the new social order (Dillon 2). While the government’s relationship with each religious group has varied over the years, religion in China since 1949 has, under CCP authority, undergone periods of both tolerance and persecution, with the religious growth of the post-Mao period indicating that religion continues to have a place in Chinese society.

Buddhism

Despite Christianity’s much remarked upon growth in China since 1978, Buddhism has remained the country’s largest religion by far. The results of the *1993 Survey on Social Mobility and Social Change* show that 72% of the people who indicated they believed in one of the five official religions were Buddhist. While reliable numbers of believers for any religion in China are difficult to obtain, the *International Religious Freedom Report 2007*, issued by the United States Department of State, conservatively estimates that at least one hundred million Chinese people are Buddhists, with the

country having around “16,000 Buddhist temples and monasteries, 200,000 Buddhist monks and nuns, more than 1,700 ‘reincarnate lamas,’ and 32 Buddhist schools”. Even more important, Buddhism remains influential even among non-believers. Most of the famous temples scattered around China have been restored and reopened, attracting both pilgrims and non-religious tourists (Tu 94). Jade Buddha and Guanyin⁶ pendants are sold in shops throughout the country, not merely at temples. Even the Chinese government, according to some observers, has apparently given tacit approval to Buddhism’s role in Chinese society, with “The Thousand Hands of Guanyin (千手观音),” an overtly religious performance, winning the top award at the 2005 China Central Television (CCTV) Spring Festival gathering (Ming). Indeed, although Buddhism, like Christianity and Islam, has foreign roots, it has a much longer history in China and has become thoroughly sinicized, undoubtedly making it far more acceptable to government officials than religions such as Christianity which have a recent imperial past and much closer ties to foreigners.

This widespread influence, however, made Buddhism a target during the early years of the PRC. After centuries of support from various emperors and government officials, not to mention commoners, many monasteries had large landholdings and were quite wealthy (Ming). Such wealth naturally fostered resentment among the surrounding peasants, and many monasteries lost their land during the Land Reform campaign of the 1950s, thus depriving the monks of their livelihood (Dillon 12). Many of the clergy were forced, be it by poverty, social and governmental pressure, or personal choice, to resume lay life, while others were sent to labor camps or even executed (Hunter and Chan 219).

⁶ Guanyin, also known as Kuan Yin, is the Chinese bodhisattva of compassion and mercy.

Although Buddhism, prior to the Cultural Revolution, was recognized as an official religion both government officials and Buddhist leaders encouraged a reformed Buddhism that supported the PRC and CCP, temple destruction and abuse of Buddhist clergy still occurred during both the Land Reform and Suppression of Counter-Revolutionaries campaigns (Dillon 11). This destruction, of course, intensified during the Cultural Revolution, culminating in the closing of all temples and monasteries and the destruction of much of their artwork and statuary. Furthermore, the buildings themselves were often converted for public use as government offices, factories, and apartments. While Buddhism was not specifically targeted during this period, it was undoubtedly connected to traditional Chinese culture in the minds of the Red Guards, making it a prime example of a practice that should be eliminated along with the rest of the Four Olds.⁷ Furthermore, although many of the lay believers likely retained their faith in Buddhism throughout these periods, they did not dare to worship in temples or show any outward sign of devotion (Welch 300).⁸

Unfortunately, another vital aspect of Buddhism may have been destroyed during these various campaigns, specifically, “the traditional lineages of practice and scholarship” of the various schools of Buddhism (Hunter and Chan 222). Only an estimated 25,000 monks survived the Cultural Revolution, just 5% of the 1930s’ numbers. Since few new monks had been ordained post-1949, the majority of those remaining were elderly and had suffered years of hardship during the Cultural Revolution and the government’s other campaigns (220-1). At the same time, the government had established the Chinese Buddhist Association [CBA] in the early 1950s to promote a

⁷ The Four Olds were old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits.

⁸ Before the Cultural Revolution, however, the religious had short periods of respite during which they were once again allowed to worship openly.

unified Buddhism that supported the CCP while at the same time controlling the religion and its adherents. While many viewed this group to merely be an unrepresentative arm of the CCP, it too was disbanded during the Cultural Revolution, and when the CBA was finally allowed to reconvene, it spearheaded Buddhism's restoration program, repairing monasteries and launching new training programs for young monks (220). Such governmental control, not to mention the devastation that the Cultural Revolution caused, has likely eliminated some of the varieties in the Chinese Buddhist tradition, and the CCP's control of the repair and reopening of the temples can only have exacerbated the situation. On the other hand, Hunter and Chan report that the more traditional doctrines are still being taught at most monasteries, with the CBA's call for "a rather syncretic form of rationalistic, this-worldly Buddhism" that emphasizes serving the masses being mainly a formality used to mollify government officials (221-2).

On the whole, however, the post-1978 situation for Buddhism is far improved. With temples and monasteries reopened, lay believers can once more enter for worship and pilgrimages. Buddhism has again become a topic for intellectual discussion and scholarship, and an increasing number of monks are being ordained, allowing the transmission of teachings to continue. While the living conditions for the clergy vary widely, those living in famous, well-visited temples have quite comfortable situations. Indeed, some young men apparently become monks for a few years to save money before getting married (224), while others indulge in, for example, high-end cell phones and cab rides that are beyond the financial capabilities of the average Chinese. Such wealth has, in many cases, led to varying degrees of corruption mimicking that of the general government, with both monks and lay people using their wealth to gain prestige and their

prestige to gain wealth. In fact, some observers argue that the government and many higher-ranking monks consider temples to be economic entities more focused on making a profit than encouraging spirituality (Ming).

The potential financial benefits of believing in Buddhism has become apparent even among lay people, with the god of wealth (财神爷) increasing in popularity as the Chinese economy has grown. Many of these worshippers may not actually be true believers but instead figure that no harm and perhaps much gain will come from appealing for divine assistance. If their request is granted, they are sure to return to the temple to make a donation in thanks, thus furthering the temple's wealth. Indeed, this phenomenon is likely a symptom of what Daniel B. Wright describes as a "spiritual search [that] is eclectic and unfocused;" he notes that a woman he encountered wore a Buddha pendant for good luck and would burn incense at a temple if she had a problem or needed something, even though she was unsure if she actually believed in Buddha (159). Even more devout followers express their religiosity mainly through occasional temple visits, infrequent chats with monks, and eating vegetarian meals on only certain days each month, with the more educated practitioners tending to approach Buddhism from a philosophical and historical sense (Hunter and Chan 225-6). This flexibility as well as Buddhism's long history in China undoubtedly help explain the religion's return to dominance after Deng's reforms and its continued strength in China today.

Catholicism

Unlike Buddhism and Protestantism, Catholicism's numbers in China began small, and its growth has remained relatively static, with the increase in adherents reflecting the

increase in China's population (Madsen "Catholic" 163). In 1949 China had an estimated 3.183 million Catholics (Sang 126), and registered Catholics today number only five million or so. The Vatican, on the other hand, estimates that approximately ten million more Vatican-affiliated believers worship underground (United States). This number, however, remains controversial, with Western scholars generally accepting that both official and unofficial believers number around ten to twelve million (Madsen "Catholic" 163). Indeed, in the 1993 Survey, merely 5% of the 10.7% of religious responders identified themselves as Catholic, with only Daoism having fewer adherents. Translated to China's then-population of 1.186 billion, the country had an estimated 6.35 million Catholics at that time, a number that closely resembles official estimates. These comparatively small numbers no doubt derive in part from both Catholicism's distinctly foreign past and its particularly tense relations with the CCP.

Even as the number of Chinese Catholics grew in the first half of the twentieth century, the church's control remained firmly in the hands of foreign-born priests and missionaries, despite efforts of a small group of priests to increase the power of the native leadership while at the same time working to foster more respect for Chinese culture (Wiest 90). In 1946, for example, seventeen of China's twenty archbishops were foreigners, while over 80% of the country's dioceses were run by foreign bishops (Sang 126). Furthermore, the Chinese followers generally did not receive the training needed to assume leadership positions in the church hierarchy, and the new converts being, on the whole, rather poor and uneducated poverty did not help the situation (Stockwell 167). Such internal tensions were only exacerbated when the Vatican openly supported the Nationalists [GMD] during China's civil war and refused to acknowledge the

establishment of the PRC, even telling Chinese Catholics that any association with the communists and their activities would result in ex-communication (Hunter and Chan). The CCP understandably considered the Catholic church to have put foreign interests before those of the Chinese people, and when all foreigners were finally expelled from the country by the mid-1950s, the Chinese Catholics were left with little leadership and a hostile government.

The Catholics' situation did not, unfortunately, improve much even after the expulsion of the foreign leadership. Most Chinese continued to regard the Catholic church "as one of the few organizations in China that still supported the Nationalists," a situation not helped by the majority of Catholics continuing to follow the Vatican's lead in resisting, often vocally, the CCP's efforts in controlling the church and Chinese life (Stockwell 170). Indeed, when the CCP established the Catholic Patriotic Association [CPA], a mass organization intended to control the church and its followers, they had great difficulty in finding Catholic leaders to head it, since doing so would require them to reject their commitment to the Vatican, a major betrayal of their faith (Madsen "Catholic" 165). While some Catholics supported this patriotic stance, the majority remained hostile to both the CCP and the CPA, continuing to practice their faith in secret. Meanwhile, the Pope refused to recognize any actions, such as electing and consecrating new bishops, that were taken without the approval of the Vatican (Stockwell 171), while the CCP viewed the Vatican's attempts at controlling the church as "imperial interference in Chinese affairs" and as "reactionary sabotage" (Hunter and Chan 237).

These conflicts between the CCP and the Vatican resulted in a break in relations that continues to this day. Catholicism's uniquely close tie to a foreign power has

resulted in a phenomenon unseen in either Buddhism or Protestantism: the development of a well-organized underground Catholic community that has a central authority, namely the underground Catholic Bishops Conference that corresponds to the official Bishops Conference (Madsen “Catholic” 167). The relationship between the official and unofficial churches has long been tense and even violent, with certain factions in the underground church even arguing that the CPA is a schism church, which would mean the baptisms and marriages that its priests perform are invalid (Dillon 15). On the other hand, the tensions have begun to abate in recent years as more believers become satisfied with the official church, an approval that largely derives from the majority of the official bishops quietly receiving the Vatican’s sanction in the form of “apostolic mandates” (Madsen “Catholic” 168). Nonetheless, the Vatican’s diplomatic ties to Taiwan continue to be a barrier to the restoration of official ties between Rome and the mainland’s Catholics, and while current relations between the Vatican and the CPA may have less tension than in years past, the CCP has not relented in its efforts to shut down the underground church and arrest its leaders.

At the same time, the official church has had its own internal issues, many of which focus on the dearth of ordained clergy. Unsurprisingly, the Catholic clergy, like those of other religions, suffered during the CCP’s early campaigns and especially, of course, during the Cultural Revolution, resulting in a population that was mainly older and often in poor health. Some interesting issues arose from these campaigns, not the least of which is the problem of married clergy. Of the only 1,300 elderly priests left in China in 1982, many had been forced by CCP officials to marry in an effort to destroy their authority with the faithful who viewed a priest’s celibacy as vital to tradition

(Hunter and Chan 239-40). Regardless, the government allowed seminaries to be reopened during the 1980s, and between the years of 1988 and 2000, around 1,650 priests were ordained, making them approximately three-quarters of the Catholic clergy's current estimated total (Madsen "Catholic" 173). The seminaries, however, are generally in urban settings, while Catholicism remains a largely rural faith, and this disparity often results in conflicted priests who come from rural backgrounds but are trained in the city before being sent back to the countryside, giving them just enough education and experience to alienate them from their congregations and leave them dissatisfied (180). Nonetheless, Catholicism's current situation in China remains vastly improved over pre-1978 levels, and its future will undoubtedly continue to be shaped by the persistent attempts of both the Vatican and the CCP to exert more control over the faithful.

Protestantism

Of all the official religions in China, both Chinese and Western scholars have most remarked upon Protestantism's astounding recovery and growth. While Protestants numbered a mere one million at the time of the PRC's founding (Janz 145), their numbers have exploded to at least twenty million people worshipping in official churches alone in China today. SARA director Ye Xiaowen is even reported as saying that China has an estimated total of 110 million Protestants (United States), although most scholars argue that numbers that high are likely inflated. Calculating the number of Protestants in China, after all, is especially tricky since much of the growth during the past three decades has been in the countryside and a good portion of believers worship in decentralized underground house meetings of dubious legality, both of which make an accurate count

difficult (Bays 185). House meetings have a tenuous relationship with the government: while SARA states that family and friends worshipping or studying informally together at home need not register with the government, any formal worship must take place at an approved facility (United States). Despite the potential for governmental prosecution, many Protestants continue to attend house meetings, and these meetings vary widely in size and organization as well as relations with the official Protestant churches, which are governed jointly by the Christian Three-Self Patriotic Movement [TSPM] and the China Christian Council [CCC]. Unlike the official and underground Catholic churches, the TSPM-registered churches and the house meetings have no significant differences in theological teachings, generally making their relationship more amicable than that of the registered and underground Catholics, with some individuals being active in both groups (Bays 185). The main difference between the two groups, therefore, is political, with the TSPM having repudiated foreign ties and having professed support for the PRC to receive government sanction. On the other hand, the reasons people choose to attend house meetings are not necessarily political opposition to the government or the official churches; some attend for convenience or lack of an alternative, some for extra study and worship, while others appreciate that many of these meetings have large networks in China and ties with foreigners (Hunter and Chan 3). Regardless, since the government does not control the house meetings, they are politically controversial, but they nonetheless remain a vital part of Chinese Protestantism.

Perhaps most important to understanding Protestantism in China is to recognize that Chinese Protestantism is at once both a recognizable foreign implant and a distinctly Chinese phenomenon and has been since before the founding of the PRC. Even today,

many official TSPM churches still sing hymns—with a robed choir—and have evangelical sermons similar to those in the West (Bays 187). Furthermore, many congregations are still based around a core of influential believers who were practicing before the CCP took over in 1949 (Hunter and Chan 6). On the other hand, missionaries and indigenous believers have long combined Protestant teachings with local tradition to attract and retain followers, with a special focus being placed upon “supernatural healing” and “protection and vengeance,” issues that traditional Chinese spirituality have long emphasized (7). This division between Western and Chinese-influenced Protestant practices is especially evident when comparing urban and rural Protestant communities. Protestants in cities, especially those that have had extensive pre-1949 and recent Western contact, tend to follow the Western traditions more closely, while rural converts may have only a vague notion of the religious tenets and rituals that their urban brethren follow (Bays 189). While many of the worshippers at urban churches emphasize their cosmopolitan, Western nature, the rural churches are often quite nativistic and disavow any connection to the West, with the converts’ introduction to Protestantism often coming from ethnic Chinese preachers from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and other overseas Chinese communities (Tu 91).

Part of the reason overseas Chinese, along with the untrained laity, are serving the rural communities is the inability of the TSPM to produce enough trained clergy to keep up with the demand (Bays 190). In 1999, for example, the country had only three thousand or so graduates from seminaries, with a mere thirteen hundred being ordained; the majority of congregations, therefore, are led by laypeople with little or no training (*Ibid.*). Of the nation’s church workers, the ordained clergy comprise only ten percent,

with the lay leaders making up the difference (Janz 145). This emphasis on the laity, by both necessity and choice, undoubtedly contributes to the creation of uniquely Chinese Protestant values. For example, Denis R. Janz quotes one layperson's description of what he believes to be core Christian beliefs:

Show filial piety to parents, respect to the elderly, and love to the young; do not believe in superstition; do not worship idols or burn paper money as offerings to the dead; do not steal; do not profit at others' expense; do not strike others or abuse them; give up evil and return to good; eliminate the false and keep the true; hold firmly to the truth (147).

Perhaps most noticeable to Western Christians is that no mention of God or Jesus is made; these Christian values seem to mainly described in the context of their similarities or differences with traditional Chinese customs. Furthermore, in rural communities converts tend to be poor and often illiterate, and their groups have little or no access to Bibles, devotionals, and other materials that are generally available to the richer, more educated urban believers.

Despite such differences between urban and rural Protestants, the Chinese Protestant community on a whole is notable for its general lack of denominations. This fascinating development arose from the efforts of the TSPM during the 1950s to unify the Protestants under their control, and soon most of the different groups were worshipping together (132). This trend has continued after the re-legalization of religion at the end of the Cultural Revolution, with all the official churches and most of the house meetings being non-denominational. Although the majority of Chinese Protestants do not proscribe to any particular denomination, their traditions, especially in rural areas, most closely reflect those of Pentecostalism and tend to be highly evangelical (Tu 91). Besides urging the standardization of belief, the TSPM worked closely and willingly with the CCP to create a new Christianity that moved beyond its history of imperialism and

capitalism. While not all Protestants supported the CCP and its plans for a new China, they were perhaps, of all the religious groups, most vocal in their support of the Party. They expressed their ideas on a new Christianity in a 1950 document called “The Christian Manifesto” that encouraged “patriotism, self-reliance, anti-imperialism, and anti-capitalism.” By 1952 over 400,000 Protestants out of the only one million or so adherents had signed this manifesto, thus indicating that the creation of the TSPM was more than merely a CCP attempt to control the Protestant community (Janz 129). Today, however, the proliferation of house meetings indicates that government and TSPM control over believers is far from complete. The CCP continues to arrest, imprison, and re-educate illegal underground practitioners (Dillon 15), but both the official and underground Protestant communities are, nonetheless, still growing, with their astounding increase in adherents, not to mention their numbers alone, making them impossible to disregard.

Conclusion

The nature of China’s religious freedom continues to be debated among the CCP and international governments, but neither group can deny the remarkable religious growth the country has experienced in the post-Mao era. Foreign visitors to China in the 1970s remarked upon the nation’s apparent lack of religiosity (Janz 138), but merely three decades later, religious believers make up an estimated 31.4% of the adult Chinese population (Sun). While the modern forms of these religions, Christianity in particular, may have departed from their pre-1949 roots, they have developed into dynamic communities that continue to attract new converts. Such growth in an actively atheist

nation is remarkable, especially since many Chinese can remember the outright persecution and degradation of religion during the Cultural Revolution and many of the CCP's earlier campaigns. The phenomenon can only give rise to questions: why, at a time of unprecedented economic growth, are more and more people turning to religion? Buddhism and Christianity have the most adherents—what do converts find appealing about these particular religions? Is there any way to understand the increase in religiosity beyond the generic argument that the Chinese people are suffering from an ideological void after the collapse of Mao's personality cult?

While many scholars touch upon these issues in their work, they tend to focus on the relationship of religious groups with the government and not on the appeal of religion in post-Mao China; their various hypotheses, as a result, are just a side note to their main argument and often have not been tested using statistical data. Two notable exceptions are Alan Hunter and Kim-Kwong Chan's *Protestantism in Contemporary China* and Luo Zhufeng's *Religion under Socialism in China*, and the information from these books forms the basis of many of the hypotheses discussed in the following section. The rest of this work, therefore, will attempt to use a statistical analysis of the results of the *1993 Survey on Social Mobility and Social Change* to answer these kinds of questions on religion's appeal in contemporary China.

PART TWO: HYPOTHESES ABOUT THE RISE OF RELIGION

While the individual hypotheses discussed in this section cannot hope to fully explain religion's startling popularity in China over the past three decades, together they may provide some insight into religion's attraction while at the same time highlighting some of the country's recent social, economic, and political trends. Indeed, the nine hypotheses included in this section help to illustrate two overarching theories on the reasons for religious belief: some people may turn to religion out of personal needs, while others possibly become religious as a result of social influence. Overlap among the hypotheses in these two theories does, of course, exist, but the theories can, nonetheless, provide a basic framework for the motivations behind religious belief. For those who turn to religion out of personal needs, their religious belief fulfills certain social or psychological needs that they have found lacking in society as a whole. The hypotheses that older people are looking for support, for example, or lonely people are seeking a social group illustrate the phenomenon. At the same time, socialization may also have a strong influence on religious belief, with factors such as increased Westernization and the reemergence of traditional culture being just a few examples.. These two theories, then, provide a useful way to categorize the various hypotheses.

Of course, many other explanations beyond the ones I have selected also exist, but in this section I describe nine hypothesis that I have found to be fairly common, logical, or interesting. After explaining the logic behind each hypothesis, I use the 1993 survey to test its accuracy. The results from these regression analyses can be found in Table 8

on page fifty-seven. Finally, when available, I also include information from the 2005 survey to provide an updated look at the reasons for religious belief.

Personal Needs

Hypothesis one: Older people, many of whom are looking for increased social and psychological support, are more likely to be religious.

In his book *River Town*, Peter Hessler describes his visit to a Catholic church in Fuling, Sichuan, during his stay there from 1996 to 1998: the priest is eighty-three years old, and the parishioners number only fifty or so, most of whom are elderly as well. The priest remarks that his church sees more funerals than baptisms and weddings combined, and he worries for the future of his parish (224-5). Such a sight appears to have been fairly common in post-Mao China, with older people seeming to make up the majority of the country's religious, and various scholars have made anecdotal observations that support this hypothesis. Alan Hunter and Kim-Kwong Chan, for example, observe that the majority of lay Buddhists in China in the early 1990s appeared to be middle-aged or elderly (Hunter and Chan 227) and that "retired people...are often among the most fervent (Protestant) disciples" (6). Denis Janz, in turn, mentions that at a Protestant worship service with over eight hundred people attending, the old outnumbered the young (146). In addition, a study conducted by the Institute for Research on Religion at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences (上海社会科学院宗教研究所) showed that before 1996 people aged sixty and older comprised the main part of the city's religious followers (Sun).

What attraction does religion hold for this group? A survey from the 1980s that the Institute for Research on Religion conducted, once again, in Shanghai produced six clear reasons why Christianity appealed to older, retired workers, although many of these reasons can likely be applied to Buddhism as well. Some suffered from untreatable illnesses; others had serious family troubles; a few had great “spiritual trauma from political movements;” some were confronting their mortality and wished for their last years to be peaceful; the testimonies of believers convinced others to converts; and finally, many were quite lonely and were looking for a social group (Luo 196-8). The later survey of religious belief in Shanghai echoes these reasons, emphasizing illness and loneliness as main reasons behind conversion (Sun). Along these lines, Richard Madsen, while interviewing Catholics in China in the late 1990s, noted that their faith and interest in religion increased as they aged and began to “consider their mortality” (*China’s* 97).

Furthermore, older believers’ numbers likely received an additional boost from pre-Cultural Revolution adherents who are once again publicly professing their faith. Indeed, Professor Liu Zhongyu of East China Normal University notes that since the religious were largely unable to teach new students during the Mao years due to regular government disapproval and often outright repression, by the time religious activities resumed, the majority of the religious were middle-aged or elderly (Sun). The survey in Shanghai from the 1980s illustrates this phenomenon: among the older, retired Christians surveyed, about half were pre-Cultural Revolution believers (Luo 196). Similarly, a 1983 study of Catholics in Qingpu County near Shanghai also showed that the main body of their congregation consisted of believers who had been teenagers and young adults at the time of Communist takeover (211).

Table 1: Age of Religious Believers		
	18-39	55+
Buddhists	59.4%	19.9%
Protestants	51.4%	28.5%
Catholics	40%	20%
Non-religious	50%	17.8%

However, the numbers from both the 1993 survey and the 2005 survey do not completely support this hypothesis. As Table 1 illustrates, the proportion of older believers versus younger ones in the 1993 survey varied greatly depending on the religion. The results show that all three religions, when compared to the non-religious, do in fact attract a higher percentage of believers over age fifty-five. This phenomenon is most pronounced among the Protestants, for whom older people have 10.7% more than they do among the general population. The Buddhists, on the other hand, had a distinctly higher level of young people, while the Catholics had a much lower percentage of young people compared to the other religions and the non-religious. Nonetheless, in regards to numbers alone, the survey shows the young believers do outnumber the old even in 1993.

Furthermore, the 2005 survey shows that the trend towards more youthful believers became more pronounced during the intervening fifteen years. The results from that survey showed that people over fifty-five numbered only 9.6% of the total believers. This lower percentage of older believers in 2005 compared to 1993 can likely be attributed in part to followers from the older, pre-Cultural Revolution generation passing away, as well the general trend, according to Professor Liu, of the country's religious makeup becoming distinctly younger over the last ten years. Another interesting by-product of this demographic change is that, by 2005, illness is no longer one of the main reasons behind religious conversion (Sun).

However, regardless of the current situation, the results from the 1993 survey are also inconsistent with the other surveys and observations from that time period. While the discrepancy with the Shanghai survey that found the majority of followers to be older can likely be explained in part by the city having a far greater percentage of people sixty-five and older than the rest of the country—13.1% for Shanghai versus 7.4% for the rest of China in 1998 (China Development), many other scholars during the early 1990s made similar observations for China as a whole. In further contradiction of their claims, as early as 1994, some observers began noticing an increased interest in religion, especially Protestantism, among the country's youth (Tefft). In the early 1990s, for example, the Chinese government was concerned enough about the growth of religion among the country's youth to being a series of “clampdowns” in hopes of restricting its expansion (“China”). In addition, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, many Protestant churches reported that they often had services in which over half of the attendees were under thirty-five (Stockwell 200). Such reports directly contradict the hypothesis that religious belief was concentrated among the older population.

Furthermore, analyzing the 1993 survey shows that no strong correlation exists between religious beliefs and age. Furthermore, only Protestants have the slightest relationship between age and belief: compared to people ages forty to fifty-four, religious belief among those under thirty-nine decreases as they become younger. This relationship does not, however, extend to the older population; even though Protestants have a remarkably higher percentage of older believers [28%], when all other variables are held constant, they are not any more likely to be religious than the rest of the Chinese. The results for Buddhism and Catholicism are similar, indicating that age is not, on the

whole, a distinguishing factor for religiosity. This lack of a correlation between religion and age calls into question the accuracy of the argument that prior to 1995 or so,⁹ religion was mainly an activity for the country's older, retired population. The results from the 1993 survey do show that older people make up a higher percentage of the religious than they do of the general population but so do younger people, at least for Buddhism and Protestantism. Furthermore, while the average age of believers has, indeed, decreased, the difference between the results from the 1993 and 2005 surveys is not as great as Professor Liu implies: in 2005 people aged sixteen to thirty-nine comprise 62% of believers (Sun), but even in 1993 people in this age group made up 59.6% of all the religious surveyed.

Hypothesis two: More and more young people are turning to religion in an attempt to alleviate the increasing pressures of contemporary life.

Just as the supposed elderly composition of China religious followers has been much speculated about, so have the reasons behind the conversion of more youthful segments of the population. Some young people, of course, were raised in their religion; the majority of novices at one training center in the early 1980s had, for example, come from Buddhist families and cited familial influence as a main factor in their faith (Luo 91). Similarly, devout Chinese Catholics often view their faith as “the glue that holds the generations of family together” (Madsen “China’s 98), and Protestant parents undoubtedly have a similar perception about the importance of faith in their families. However, Ji Zhe argues that since Chinese society has begun to emphasize autonomous

⁹ Professor Liu, while discussing the decreasing age of religious believers, notes that this trend began about a decade before the 2005 survey was conducted.

individualism, parental influence over children, especially in regards to religion, has been weakening. For example, a more recent survey completed at a youth gathering at a Buddhist monastery found that only five out of 115 attendees attributed their belief to familial influence (536-7). Furthermore, family influence alone cannot account for the astounding growth of all three religions among China's youth over the past three decades. Results from various surveys completed at different Chinese universities over the last eight years show that the religious range from about 9.2% to 17% of the student population (Li and Liu).

One often-stated reason behind the increase in religious belief among young people is that with the increasing competitiveness of Chinese marketplace as well as the implementation of the one-child policy, the Chinese youth are facing more and more pressure to succeed. While the media has been giving much attention to the spoiled "little emperors" who are the product of increasingly prosperous parents showering gifts and attention on the only child allowed them, these children also "bear the weight of an entire family's expectations on their tiny shoulders" (Chandler). They know that, given the poor set-up of China's public pension system, they will be called upon to care for their elderly parents and grandparents, and most people feel that the best way to secure a good future for the family is through education. Such pressure, then, is felt early in life as parents push their children academically to not only enter a good school but to even enter one at all—students must test into high school as well as college, and Chinese universities can only accommodate about half of the students who apply (*Ibid.*). Furthermore, young people face an extremely competitive job market after graduating college: in 2006, for example, approximately 4.13 million students graduated, which is

three times the number of graduates in 2001, and they, along with migrant workers, constitute the largest demographic entering the job market (Li). Many of these students are faced with unemployment or accepting a low-paying job, and others apply to graduate school in hopes of securing themselves a better job.

Given this sort of environment, that young people search for a way to alleviate stress and hardships is hardly surprising. Indeed, the results of those surveys of college students show that many of the religious, when faced with worries and hardships, use their religion to help alleviate “inner worries” and “ideological perplexities” (Li and Liu). Furthermore, this perception of religion being a way to help them deal with their problems and obtain their desires is often what originally draws them to the religion (*Ibid.*). Luo Zhufeng gives an extreme example of one young woman so plagued by mental stress that she was unable to complete her studies and had to find work; after being fired twice, the members of a Protestant church ended up providing her with the help and sympathy she needed to “face life” (97). Surveys of young people applying to Buddhist monasteries to become monks and nuns produced similar results: many had suffered disappointments in love and marriage, had failed to pass the college entrance exams or find a good job, or were unable to adapt to moving to the city from more rural areas (187-9). In addition, for some young people religion becomes not only a way to escape from these pressures, but also to express themselves and their individuality; if they come from non-religious families, their new religion helps them to establish an identity beyond parental and societal expectations (Ji 546).

However, the results from the two questions in the 1993 survey that broaches this sort of discontent¹⁰ shows no particular variation for religious belief, and regression analysis shows that almost no correlation exists between these questions and religion. While such results can neither confirm no deny the presence of social dissatisfaction among China's youth, they do indicate that religious people's attitudes differ little from those of the non-religious. The 2005 survey, on the other hand, touches on the topic, noting that just as previous decades' older religious followers often cited social and psychological discontent as their main reason for conversion, so do many of today's religious youth (Sun). Nonetheless, while this discontent may be a contributing factor to young people's religious conversion, the results from the 1993 survey show that belief in religion has done little to relieve these tensions, leading to the conclusion that these religions must offer their faithful other benefits.

Hypothesis three: Women are more likely to be religious because their social status has declined over the last few decades and they have been facing increased discrimination.

When many scholars describe large groups of religious believers in contemporary China, they seem to make the same three observations: the majority of the people in the group are middle-aged or older, they are generally poor or from rural areas, and women outnumber the men.¹¹ Even in Shanghai—hardly a rural area—77.3% of people baptized between 1979 and 1982 were women (Luo 96); furthermore, 82% of the Christians

¹⁰ “Even if parents’ demands are unreasonable, children still should do what they ask” and “some people believe that the pace of change in our society in recent years has been too fast, others say too slow, and still others think it has been just right. What is your opinion?”

¹¹ For examples, see Janz, 146; Hunter and Chan, 227.

surveyed in a workers' residential neighborhood in that city were women (195). These older women are the most evangelical, with many of them "urging others to go to the house meetings to 'listen'" (*Ibid.*). Many also have observed that female followers tend to be more fervent in their belief (Hunter and Chan 6). The gender imbalance is not, however, solely confined to Protestantism; for example, in 1984 more female Buddhist pilgrims, 80% of the total visitors, worshipped in Putuoshan Temple the night before the bodhisattva Guanyin's birthday. Observers have also noted that in the late 1980s, women comprised the majority of the young converts in every religion (Luo 96). A representative of the Buddhist Association in Beijing offered an explanation for why women tend to outnumber men, especially among those who have committed themselves to full-time religious work: it is because "women suffer more, and the aim of Buddhism is to relieve suffering" (Stockwell 89-90).

However, the explanations offered to explain this unbalanced male-to-female ratio among the religious seem, on the whole, to find their basis in gender discrimination. A study on religion completed by Chinese scholars in the late 1980s, for example, concludes that "a prominent token of feudalism still found in (Chinese) social life is inequality between men and women and discrimination against women," which "makes it hard for women to take charge of their own destiny" (Luo 96). While the government worked to promote male-female equality during the Mao years, the state has lessened its "ideological stance" on the issue in the last few decades, leading to the "increased influence of Confucian patriarchal values in Chinese society" (Zhang and Dang 86). Indeed, Chinese scholar Xu Shaoqiang determined that during the 1980s, women's sense

of self-worth began decreasing as some traditional patriarchal customs resumed (Hunter and Chan 174).

The increased inequality in Chinese society can also be seen in various other trends such as the perpetuation of China's unbalanced male-to-female ratio of births—116.9 boys are born for every one hundred girls, according to the 2000 census. The implementation of the one-child policy has led to a reemergence of the traditional preference for sons, especially in rural areas, with the result being an upsurge in sex-selective abortions, female infanticide, and the neglect or abuse of daughters (Banister). Discrimination is now increasingly common in the private sector of the economy, with woman in urban areas receiving lower wages than their male peers, and increased competition in the marketplace has allowed managers to discriminate against women and other disadvantaged workers (Zhang and Dong 86). Scholars speculate, therefore, that this sort of inequality, as well as further abuse in the home, causes a greater number of women to turn to religion in search of “relief,” consolation, and purpose (Luo 96).

While the report on the 2005 survey does not mention the gender makeup of religious followers in more recent years, the 1993 survey confirms that women comprise the majority of adherents to all three religions—they are 54.3% of Buddhists, 80% of Protestants, and 60% of Catholics—even though a small majority of men [51.1%] completed the survey. Regression analysis, however, deemphasizes the role of gender in religious belief: not only does little correlation exist between the two, gender is not statistically relevant for any of the three religions. Therefore, while women do make up the majority of all three religions, when all variables are controlled, gender is not a distinguishing factor of religious belief. Surprisingly, however, one of the two questions

related to the issue of gender discrimination—“when a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law come into conflict, even if the mother-in-law is wrong, the husband should still persuade his wife to obey his mother”—has a strong correlation with religious belief. While the question is not statistically relevant for Christians, Buddhists show strong disagreement with this statement. At the same time, however, Buddhists are also more likely to agree with the second gender discrimination-related question: “if only one child is allowed, it is better to have a son than a daughter.” While this question is not as statistically significant as the first, it still illustrates an interesting dichotomy. These seemingly contrary results, paired with the fact that Christians’ opinions on these two questions show no particular difference from those of the general Chinese population, indicate that gender discrimination is likely not a determining factor in religious belief. While these results do not imply that gender discrimination is not an issue in contemporary China, such discrimination is not, as far as the results from the 1993 survey can determine, a strong explanation for religious belief.

Hypothesis four: Protestantism and Catholicism, being group-oriented, are more popular than Buddhism among people who turn to religion out of loneliness.

While both Buddhism and Christianity have congregational aspects to their worship—Buddhists have religious assemblies and Christians have Mass or church services—Buddhism is, on the whole, a far more individualistic religion than Christianity (Luo 107). The mainstay of lay Buddhist practice is believers going to temples on their own to pray and burn incense. In contrast, Christianity revolves around attending church and group study sessions such as the Protestant house meetings. Given that loneliness is

one of the most often cited reasons for religious conversion (Janz 145), the argument that these lonely people are more likely to turn to Catholicism or Protestantism, both of which will provide them with a strong support network, is logical. Luo Zhufeng and his colleagues, for example, interviewed one young woman who was afflicted with a chronic illness. As the illness became worse, her friends and relatives began to distance themselves from her, and she only found comfort and understanding from a few Christian acquaintances, which prompted her to convert. She claimed that “only [her] Christian brothers and sisters help(ed) [her], both spiritually and physically” (107).

Many people appear to recognize and appreciate this sense of community among religious believers and often convert to become part of the tightly-knit group (*Ibid.*). Hunter and Chan reiterate this observation numerous times, noting that people may turn to religion because of “rural isolation” and the “breakdown of kinship networks” and because the community acts as a “surrogate family/pseudo-kinship network” (169). Religious conversion, therefore, allows alienated people to “find...an organization again,” which has an especially strong appeal in a society that has, in the turmoil of the past several decades, largely lost both its traditional and subsequent Communist social organizations (Yang “Inculturation” 21). Christianity is sometimes seen as being able to replace these lost social systems on a larger scale, with reports of entire villages “including the village chief and the secretary of the Party branch” converting to Christianity and being baptized (20). Indeed, Protestantism’s flexibility makes it a particularly successful replacement “organization,” with as few as two or three people able to form a “religiously sanctioned group” (Hunter and Chan 171); some church services, on the other hand, may have hundreds of worshippers in attendance (Janz 146).

At any size, these Protestant organizations appear to fulfill some people's need for a feeling of kinship that they have found lacking in their other relationships or in society as a whole. This sense of kinship is not as apparent among Buddhists, with lay believers rarely constituting a "group" of worshippers in the Christian sense; a "group" of them at a temple are usually individually praying and making offerings and just happen to be doing so at the same time (Hunter and Chan 173). Indeed, although Buddhists also have a concept of a "community of faithful,"¹² it has little impact on the lives of the average believers, whereas in Christianity—particularly Protestantism—the idea of a "universal church" and the resulting sense of "universal communion and fellowship" is a central belief and remains "a strong motivating factor" (233).

Unfortunately, the 1993 survey lacks questions that directly evaluate the respondents' loneliness, but it does, however, include three questions that can help illustrate the respondents' relationships: the number of adults in the household, the number of friends living nearby, and whether or not the respondent is living with his or her spouse. Analysis of these questions shows that a correlation with religious belief on exists only for the first question. The majority of Catholic and Protestant respondents live in households with only two adults, and while Buddhists and the non-religious have no majority, households with two adults do make up the largest percentage. Interestingly, the size of Buddhists' households closely matches those of the non-religious, while the Catholics and Protestants have a distinctly higher percentage of households with only one adult—only 7.3% of Buddhist and 8.7% of non-religious households have only one person, while 17.1% and 12.5% of Protestants and Catholics do. This prevalence of one-adult households appears to support the idea that lonely people are particularly attracted

¹² This community is known as the *sangha*.

to Christianity. However, regression analysis shows the number of adults in the household is not statistically relevant for any of the three religions; when controlling for all variables, therefore, believers' households are little different from those of the non-religious.

Similarly, the lack of a correlation between religion and the other two questions further supports the idea that the religious are remarkably similar to the rest of the Chinese population. For example, a majority of all respondents, both religious and non-religious, are married, with marriage being most common among Protestants. On the other hand, fewer Protestants and Catholics than Buddhists and the non-religious actually live with their spouses; Christians report higher instances of separation for work and the death of their spouse, a result that supports this hypothesis. However, the lack of a relationship between these questions and religious belief indicates that, as well as these questions can judge, the religious are no lonelier than the average Chinese person. Since the 2005 survey offers no more specific insights about this issue other than that loneliness was a main reason that older people converted a decade ago, the conclusion that can be drawn from these results is that if extreme loneliness drove people to religion, they now have relationships comparable to those of the non-religious and are presumably no lonelier. While these results cannot indicate if loneliness was a main reason behind believers' conversions, if it was indeed a factor, then the analysis shows religion has indeed fulfilled the need for a social group.

Hypothesis five: After the end of the Cultural Revolution and the introduction of Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms, people have lost faith in Chinese Communism's

ideology and are searching for new belief systems, with many people turning to religion.

Ever since religious growth in post-Mao China became noticeable, the most often stated reason behind this rapid increase in religion has been the idea that the average Chinese are suffering from an “ideological void.”¹³ The Chinese sociologist He Guanghu, for example, bluntly states that “it has not been a secret that there is emerging some serious moral and spiritual crisis in the Chinese society today” and attributes the emergence of religion from “underground” to such crises (551-2). The general media echoes this sentiment but often presents the idea of an “ideological void” as the main, if not only, reason behind the country’s recent religious growth. The logic behind this hypothesis appears sound: as all religious activities were being outlawed at the height of the Cultural Revolution, the general Chinese population’s adoration of Mao Zedong reached its zenith and seemed to take on almost religious dimensions. Thousands of the Red Guard memorized his sayings from *The Little Red Book*,¹⁴ claiming that it contained the “ultimate truth,” and the country was plastered in propaganda posters that included phrases such as “Chairman Mao will always be with us” and “Chairman Mao is the red sun in our hearts” (Janz 137). Furthermore, the Red Guard so venerated Mao’s image that some families would glue a picture of Mao over the front of their household shrines

¹³ Conspicuous in its failure to mention the issue of an “ideological void” is Luo’s *Religion under Socialism in China*; the book only mentions that some people may be searching for a “spiritual prop” (105) or that religion’s pragmatism suits the practical nature of China’s peasants (240). One reason for this lack may be that the book, published in its original Chinese in 1987, might have been released before the phrase became common. On the other hand, the book takes a very Marxist approach to religion, and acknowledging the general populace’s disillusionment with Chinese communism might be taken as an acknowledgement of the failure of Marxism.

¹⁴ The title directly translates from the Chinese 《毛主席语录》 as *Quotations from Chairman Mao* but is more popularly known in the West as *The Little Red Book*.

to prevent its destruction—the Red Guard would refuse to destroy the picture to get to the shrine (Wu).

By end of the Cultural Revolution, however, the horror of that period had largely discredited Mao and his form of communism, and Deng Xiaoping only exacerbated the problem with his 1978 “Reforms and Openness” policies that embraced the sort of economic principles that the CCP had previously denounced. Moreover, just as people were now largely disillusioned with communism, so too were they unsatisfied with many aspects of traditional Confucian culture that the government had campaigned against during the previous decades. While the majority of the population’s material well-being was now vastly improved over pre-1949 levels (Janz 138), people were for the first time left without a strong guiding ideology. Despite the country’s remarkable economic success since the 1980s, the government’s new emphasis on economic advance over ideological development has failed to provide enough “spiritual support” for the new Chinese society (Yang “Inculturation” 20). In recent years, the CCP’s call for citizens to continue working together to build a stronger socialist society seems to be a hollow exhortation in the face of rising government corruption (Wu). In response to this growing disillusionment, many people have embarked on a “personal search for meaning,” a quest for more significance in their lives, that often led them to religion (Hunter and Chan 169, 167).

The results from the 2005 survey apparently support this hypothesis, with Professor Liu Zhongyu claiming that China’s huge changes over the last half-century have caused people to lose their traditions, resulting in an unavoidable decline in moral standards and a weakening of human relationships. When these changes are coupled with

the enormous impact of economic changes and the introduction of Western culture, people feel unanchored and are unsure of their place in the new China, thus compelling people to search for a new mental and spiritual focus. Indeed, even though around 28% of the religious have motivations for belief that the author describes as “feudal superstitions,” including the hope to avoid disasters and receive blessings and protection, out of all the reasons for religious belief that the survey offered, the most—a total of 24.1% —cite their hope to improve their behavior and be well-disposed toward others as their main reason for belief. The second most common reason [20.3%] is that they turned to religion in hope enriching their spirit and having a peaceful state of mind. While these reasons do not definitively state that most people’s belief arose out of their attempts to fill the “ideological void,” other questions in the survey presumably answer validate this hypothesis definitively enough for Professor Liu to cite it as the main reason people are turning to religion.

While the results from most of questions in the 1993 related to this issue¹⁵ indicate that little relationship with religious belief exists, answers to one question—“We should trust and obey the government, for in the last analysis it serves out interest”—illustrates the confusion of the period. Regression analysis indicates that when controlling for all variables, an strong correlation exists with religious belief, though the question is statistically relevant only for Buddhists, who are more likely to disagree with the idea that people should trust and obey the government. Christian opinions, in contrast, reflect those of the general population: the majority all agree with that statement. Such

¹⁵ “Some people believe that the pace of political reform in our country in recent years has been too fast, others think it has been too slow, and still others think it has been just right;” “some people believe that the pace of change in our society in recent years has been too fast, others say too slow, and still others think it has been just right;” “people should unconditionally support the government without thinking of their own interests,” and “everything I have has been given to me by the Party and the state.”

arguments, of course, do not directly broach the topic of an ideological void, but they do emphasize that, on the whole, little variation exists between the religious and non-religious—all Chinese people, on the whole, support the government and credit it with improving their lives. Since these results contradict the idea that people are largely disillusioned and dissatisfied with the government, if a so-called ideological void existed in 1993, it was not directly related to faith in the government.

Social Influence

Hypothesis six: Believers of each religion appear to be more numerous in areas where that religion had a strong historical presence.

Historically, each of the three religions was largely concentrated in certain regions of the country. Buddhism, of course, has been in China for around two thousand years, and its influence has long been spread throughout the country. Belief in Buddhism throughout the Cultural Revolution and other government campaigns, however, appears to have remained stronger among minorities, especially those in the southern region. Despite the resurgence of the religion's popularity with the Han Chinese majority over the past three decades, that the minority regions of the country have a higher concentration of believers is hardly surprising since Buddhism and many minorities' culture have long been closely intertwined. Jason Kindopp, for example, describes Tibetan Buddhism as a continued "vital force" in not only Tibet, but places such as Sichuan as well (1). Yunnan and Qinghai also have a strong Tibetan Buddhist presence (Stockwell 100). On the other hand, Luo Zhufeng notes that Buddhism in Han majority regions is most likely to be concentrated in regions with "sacred places," particularly the

four great, sacred mountains in Chinese Buddhist tradition: Mount Jiuhua in Anhui province, the island mount of Putuo in Zhejiang, Mount Wutai in Shanxi, and Mount Emei in Sichuan (86).

Christianity, on the other hand, has only had a reasonably strong presence in China over the last few hundred years, and for a good portion of this period, the Chinese government restricted its movements. The Qing emperors banned Christianity from 1724 to 1846, and even after the ban was lifted, missionaries were confined to the areas which post-Opium War negotiations had allowed them access (Fairband and Goldman 222). As a result, even in the late 1980s Christianity appears to have remained strongest in coastal regions near ports where foreigners had conducted business. Luo Zhufeng reports that in 1984 an estimated 32.6% of Catholics resided in three of China's twenty-two provinces—Zhejiang, Fujian, and Guangdong—which line the country's southern coast (87). Similarly, 37% of Protestants lived in these three provinces in 1922, indicating a steady Christian influence in this region throughout the years (*Ibid.*). A specific example of long-standing belief can be found in Zhejiang province as well as nearby Jiangsu, where traditional "boat people" who fished the area's rivers have been faithful Catholics since before the Qing emperor's ban on Christianity (Stockwell 166).

Furthermore, more updated statistics point to nearly half of China's five thousand or so official Catholic churches, as well their clergy, being found in Hebei province in the northeastern part of the country (Kindopp 1). Indeed, a Catholic nun reports that most Catholics are found in Hebei and Shaanxi, with Hebei being the seat of the underground Catholic church (Maheu). A different source seconds the report of Hebei having the highest concentration of Catholics but points to Shandong as having the second highest,

at least in 1993 (Stockwell 175). Regardless, Hebei surrounds the Beijing and Tianjin municipalities, where foreigners as far back the Jesuits in the early 1600s have been attempting to gain converts (Fairbank and Goldman 151). In short, although Catholics do have a strong presence in southern areas such as Fujian and Shanghai, their believers are concentrated more in northern areas (Hunter and Chan 253).

In contrast, Protestantism seems to have begun spreading beyond its areas of historical influence and today is far more dispersed throughout the country. Although Kindopp reports that Protestantism's areas of greatest influence continue to be the southeastern coastal provinces such as Anhui and Zhejiang as well as landlocked Henan, the religion has also experienced extensive growth in China in far more remote areas in the southwest and northeast (2). Indeed, even though areas of Zhejiang, Anhui, and Henan have seen a relatively large increase in their already high concentration of believers, sizeable house meetings are now being held all over the country, especially in rural areas (Stockwell 201). Hunter and Chan have noticed other phenomena among Chinese Protestants in recent years, including the conversion of many minority peoples in places such as Yunnan and Guizhou (173).

While the report on the 2005 survey does not include the geographic distribution of the respondents, the 1993 survey made note of respondents' birth province, although their current location is not included. The survey results show that Buddhism is indeed part of the entire country's cultural makeup: of the twenty-seven provinces, municipalities, and autonomous regions included in the survey, Buddhists were born in twenty-three of them. Protestant respondents, in contrast, come from only thirteen of the

	Buddhists	Protestants	Catholics	Non-religious
Yunnan	22.4%	3.0%	0.0%	2.6%
Sichuan	9.4%	12.1%	0.0%	9.3%
Zhejiang	10.6%	0.0%	6.7%	1.4%
Fujian	16.1%	8.1%	0.0%	2.1%
Guangdong	6.3%	9.1%	0.0%	5.6%
Anhui	1.2%	12.1%	6.7%	5.8%
Henan	0.8%	21.2%	6.7%	6.5%
Heilongjiang	0.0%	9.1%	0.0%	3.5%
Jiangsu	6.3%	6.1%	20.0%	5.4%
Shandong	1.6%	6.1%	13.3%	9.4%
Jilin	1.6%	0.0%	13.3%	4.0%
Shanxi	2.0%	3.0%	13.3%	2.0%
Beijing	0.0%	0.0%	6.7%	0.6%
Hubei	4.7%	3.0%	6.7%	4.4%
Guangxi	2.4%	0.0%	6.7%	3.2%

locations and Catholics only ten. The majority of Buddhists—a total of 64.8%—come from two distinct regions: neighboring Yunnan [22.4%] and Sichuan [9.4%]—both of which border Tibet—in the south, and Zhejiang [10.6%], Fujian [16.1%], and Guangdong [6.3%] along the southeastern coastline. These percentages are most impressive in Yunnan, Zhejiang, and Fujian, where the percentage of Buddhists is far higher than the percentage of the nation’s population as a whole. Yunnan is, of course, an area with a strong minority presence, while Zhejiang is home to one of the four sacred mountains, so neither of these locations is surprising; since Fujian borders Zhejiang, its high percentage of Buddhists is also unsurprising. In short, while such a large majority of Buddhists originating from only five provinces is surprising, the locations themselves are not.

As for Christianity, the concentration of Protestants largely mirrors scholars’ assertions: Anhui, Zhejiang, and Henan were reputed to have the largest number of believers, and the survey shows that 21.2%, the largest percentage, come from Henan,

and 12.1% are from Anhui. Interestingly, however, not a single Protestant was born in Zhejiang. Despite claims of Protestantism achieving widespread influence in recent years, over 80% of the Protestants surveyed were born in only eight provinces,¹⁶ with the majority of these provinces being located in regions to which missionaries would have had access. Only Heilongjiang, China's northern-most province, proves to be a notable exception.

Catholicism's results prove to be even more interesting: not a single respondent came from Hebei province, which is supposedly home to at least one-fourth of the country's Catholics (Maheu). Instead, the highest concentration of Catholics was in Jiangsu [20%], followed by Jilin, Shanxi, and Shandong. While all four locations are logical given Catholicism's history in China's northern and coastal areas, the complete lack of believers from Hebei is startling. Although the strong presence of Catholics in Hebei is well-established, one possible explanation for this discrepancy is that, compared to the rest of the population, their numbers are statistically insignificant. Regardless, the rest of the Catholics are spread among Beijing, Zhejiang, Anhui, Henan, Hubei, and Guangxi. On the whole, however, despite a few irregularities, the geographic distribution for Catholics is, like those for Buddhists and Protestants, largely in line with scholars' previous studies as well the religions' historical presence in China.

Hypothesis seven: Young people begin studying Christianity because they are interested in the West and its success and culture.

In a 2001 survey of Chinese college students at Renmin University of China, the majority of the self-identified Protestants first came in contact with the religion not by

¹⁶ Henan, Anhui, Sichuan, Heilongjiang, Fujian, Guangdong, Jiangsu, and Shandong.

attending church but from reading books, going to class, or through studies related to their major, and over half reported that their interest in the religion arose “through studying Western culture, art, or philosophy” (Yang “Characteristics”). Indeed, with its relatively short history in China, historical connections to imperialism, and the religious repression during the Cultural Revolution and its preceding movements, the general Chinese population’s lack of familiarity with Christianity is hardly surprising. A study in one province, for example, concluded that most people under the age of forty “do not know what Christianity is” (qtd. in Janz 146). Oftentimes students, therefore, are first given a more in-depth introduction to Christianity in courses such as the “history of western philosophy,” where they might read Thomas Aquinas, or “foreign literature,” in which Bible passages are frequently read (He 136), and some university classes will also use Bible passages to teach English (Stockwell 204). Furthermore, in recent years, Bible stories have been published and sold in bookstores not as part of the Bible, which is illegal to sell outside of churches, but as general literature (Ji 538).

However, although these Christian students then report a more spiritual basis for their belief—a good portion claim that they have “received God’s enlightenment and believe that Christian teachings are the truth” (Yang “Characteristics”)—Christianity’s ties to Western culture often seems to be what originally draws young people to the religion. Observers report that Protestantism is frequently packaged together with other aspects of Western culture, fashions, technology, and ideology (Hunter and Chan 171). Sheryl Wudunn reports, for example, that young people “sometimes regard Christianity as ‘cool,’ a fashionable Western product analogous to McDonald’s hamburgers, hula hoops, and Coca-Cola” (Kristoff and Wudunn 291). Western holidays have become

popular among the youth regardless of their religious faith (Ji 537), with Christmas being regarded as “a symbol of ‘western modern civilization’” (545). Wudunn interviewed one thirty-four year old man attending a Catholic church in Beijing who remained indecisive about his belief but who told her, “‘This is Western culture, and I want to learn more about it. This is a very famous religion’” (Kristoff and Wudunn 291). Hunter and Chan echo this observation, noting that the Protestant church is a well known symbol of the west, “which enhances its attractiveness” (171). Indeed, many intellectuals and members of the urban middle class also use Protestantism as a way to “identify with the West and modernism” (Bays 196).

This philosophy seems to be reflected in the Renmin University survey results: although only 3.6% of the students interviewed are Christians, 61.5% of those who do not believe still have an interest in the religion (Yang “Characteristics”). Furthermore, over 70% of these students believe that Christianity helps to “enrich society’s culture, is beneficial in helping Chinese people understand the West, and increases cultural exchange between China and the West;” only 17% percent of the Christian students, on the other hand, agree with this statement (*Ibid.*). Perhaps, after becoming religious, these students became disillusioned with the amount of influence Christianity wields, or maybe they have found that Chinese Protestantism has, in many ways, become an entity distinct from Western Christianity.

Regardless, results from the 1993 survey do not support this hypothesis, with over 60% of both Protestants and Catholics claiming to “dislike” or “very dislike” the United States—this percentage is only slightly lower than that of the average Chinese population. Furthermore, 81.2% of Protestants feel the same way about Germany, which is nearly

Table 3: Attitude toward America		
	Dislike	Like
Buddhists	62.7%	37.3%
Protestants	62.5%	37.5%
Catholics	61.6%	38.4%
Non-religious	60.7%	39.3%

Table 4: Attitude toward Germany		
	Dislike	Like
Buddhists	69.9%	30.1%
Protestants	81.2%	18.8%
Catholics	70.0%	30.0%
Non-religious	71.7%	28.3%

10% more than the non-religious. While younger people view these two countries more favorably than do their elders, the majority of people, regardless of age, “dislike” or “very dislike” both the United States and Germany. When religion and youth are considered together, however, the results change considerably, at least for the United States: 55% of Protestants and 100% of Catholics aged 18 to 39 have a favorable view of the US, compared with only 38.4% of their non-religious peers. On the other hand, the Chinese youth, regardless of their religious affiliation, have a distinctly unfavorable view of Germany, with 100% of Protestants, 66.7% of Catholics, and 69.2% of the non-religious responding that they “dislike” or “very dislike” this country. Indeed, regression analysis shows that little correlation exists between religious belief and opinions on either the United States or Germany; in short, when controlling for all variables, regression analysis proves what Tables 3 and 4 already indicate—the religious and non-religious have very similar attitudes towards these two countries.

Taking these results into consideration, the argument can be made that, circa 1993, this hypothesis could only be correct if the “West” was actually the United States. Furthermore, the Chinese people’s general dislike of both the United States and Germany,

regardless of religious belief, indicates that interest in the West is not likely a main reason behind conversion to Christianity. Unfortunately, this topic is not broached in the report on the 2005 survey, so seeing if these results have changed over the last decade or so is not possible at this time.

Hypothesis eight: Less educated people are more likely to be religious.

Despite improvements in China's educational system in recent years, wide gaps still remain between the lives and opportunities available to the well educated and less educated, and the hypothesis that a link exists between less education and religious belief seems to be well-established. For example, Hunter and Chan cite "low level(s) of education" as one of the main social conditions leading to the growth of religion in contemporary China (169). In a more extreme case, Zheng Kaitang unequivocally states that religious belief is closely tied to low levels of education, at least for Christians:

Statistics...show that among the Christians there are...more illiterate (people) than literate and more with low culture [little education] than high culture. All the statistics show that the number of Christians in different categories is in inverse proportion to the amount of cultural and scientific knowledge they have, and in direct proportion to their degree of backwardness, ignorance, and benightedness (240).

He notes that in his native county in Anhui province, the majority of Christians are peasants, with only a few teachers or cadres professing belief (233).¹⁷ Indeed, he further emphasizes his belief in the link between religion and low levels of education when he concludes the article with the assertion that the best way to "liberate" the religious is to increase their access to education and culture and to improve their understanding of science (241).

¹⁷ CCP cadres are technically prohibited from believing in religion, but many are nonetheless embracing it. These cadres argue that religion is a private issue and that their religious belief has no effect on their politics.

Why might this link between religious belief and low levels of education exist? Hunter and Chan theorize, for example, that belief in Buddhism offers less educated people “a sense of well-being” that keeps drawing them back to the temples (234). This argument would apply to Christianity as well, with the belief that they, as Christians, will have a much better life after death helping to distract them from their general poverty and lack of opportunities. Indeed, Daniel H. Bays argues that for many of the poverty-stricken and poorly-educated Protestants, their religious belief is primarily a “strategy for survival” (195). On the other hand, some argue that the Catholics are a special case, with lower levels of education more likely being an effect of belief rather than a cause. Most scholars accept that Catholics, in general, are more likely to be generational believers—Catholicism, after all, has not experienced Protestantism’s explosive growth— and they often come from the rural Catholic villages in which their ancestors had congregated during the missionary era. These villages create a close-knit but isolated community generally plagued with poverty and low levels of education (236). However, analysis of the 1993 survey reveals a startling contradiction to this assumption: Catholics were actually more likely than Buddhists, Protestants, or the non-religious to live in an urban environment and to hold urban household registration. While these rural Catholic villages may still exist, they cannot completely account for the existence of lower education levels among Catholics as compared to the non-religious.

Furthermore, this hypothesis seems to be largely grounded in the assumption that most of the country’s post-Mao religious growth has occurred in poor, rural areas where illiteracy is especially high and ignores the fact that in recent years religion has grown most quickly in the country’s rich coastal areas (Sun). After all, Christianity, with its ties

to the West, has long been attractive to some of the country's more affluent citizens, and increased scholarly study of both Buddhism and Christianity, although not generally conducted by religious followers, has boosted these religions' visibility among more educated people (He 559). In addition, the 2005 survey also shows that younger people comprise the majority of the country's religious believers today (Sun), and since only a reputed 1.1% of young people aged eighteen to twenty-four are illiterate (UNESCO),¹⁸ these statistics would indicate that this hypothesis may no longer be valid. Indeed, support of this hypothesis seems to be concentrated mainly in older works from the 1980s and early 1990s,¹⁹ with little mention of the ties between education and religion being made in more recent publications.

	None completed	Elementary	Lower middle	Upper middle	College
Buddhists	38.4%	32.2%	22.9%	6.2%	0.4%
Protestants	52.9%	17.8%	20.6%	8.8%	0.0%
Catholics	35.7%	14.3%	42.9%	7.1%	0.0%
Non-religious	30.7%	27.2%	24.6%	14.7%	2.7%

While the 2005 survey disproves this hypothesis's current validity, an analysis of the 1993 survey proves that the hypothesis, at the time it was being put forth, did actually apply. Indeed, the results from the survey show that in the early 1990s, belief in both Buddhism and Christianity was very much concentrated among the country's less educated: 38.4% of Buddhists, 52.9% of Protestants, and 35.7% of Catholics never even completed elementary school, whereas only 30.7% of the non-religious were equally uneducated. While 14.7% of the non-religious had completed upper middle school, with

¹⁸ In contrast, 9.9% of the adult Chinese population is illiterate.

¹⁹ This argument is most prominently seen in Hunter and Chan's *Protestantism in Contemporary China* and Luo's *Religion under Socialism in China*, which includes Zheng Kaitang's article in the appendix.

1.6% having graduated from college, no Christians and only one Buddhist had finished college, while a mere 6.2% of Buddhists, 8.8% of Protestants, and 7.1% of Catholics had upper middle school educations. In fact, no Protestants or Catholics had more than twelve years of education, with only two Buddhists exceeding that amount. 3.8% of the non-religious, in contrast, had thirteen or more years of schooling. Perhaps most striking is that 22% of Buddhists, 37.1% of Protestants, and 21.4% of Catholics had received no formal education at all; only 17% of the non-religious could say the same.

On the other hand, regression analysis shows that little correlation exists between religious belief and years of education. Despite the remarkably high levels of less educated religious believers, when controlling for all other variables, education actually has little effect on religious belief. Therefore, while the 1993 survey does indeed confirm that the religious are, in general, less educated than the non-religious, the results still emphasize once again how many similarities the religious share with the general population.

Hypothesis nine: One reason Protestantism is particularly successful in poor, rural areas may be because, unlike Buddhism, participation in “rituals” is relatively inexpensive.

Although Buddhism has a far longer and more intimate history with China than does Christianity, post-Mao China has nonetheless experienced a remarkable upsurge in belief in Protestantism, a growth that many scholars believe is closely linked to the religion’s flexible and economical nature. Chinese society has long placed strong emphasis on the performance of rites, be it the veneration of one’s ancestor, the worship

of a local god, or state rituals. Many of these ceremonies often require expensive “ritual offerings, operas and feasts” (Bays 196). Despite having a much shorter history in China, Protestantism’s ability to satisfy people’s desire for rituals at a relatively inexpensive cost gives it a distinct advantage over Buddhism and makes it an attractive option for poor, rural people.

After all, since Buddhist monasteries no longer have large landholdings as a means to support themselves, today they rely mainly on donations from lay believers, the proceeds from performing rituals, as well as government support to remain economically viable (Birnbaum 442). Some scholars even believe that the monasteries have become such capitalistic institutions that they are more concerned with increasing their wealth and prestige than with encouraging religious growth (Wu). The high entrance fees required to enter many of the more famous temples, as well as the amount of money required for devout worship—the costs range from expected donations to the regular purchase of incense, for example—help to validate this argument. Belief in Buddhism, in short, is quite expensive for the country’s poor.

Protestantism, in contrast, provides believers with fellowship and an ethical system that has often been adapted to suit their needs while at the same time lacks Buddhism’s social pressure to spend money. Indeed, congregations are sometimes even able to offer financial assistance to their most impoverished members as well as occasionally being able to offer educational and employment opportunities (Wu), although Hunter and Chan claim that such material advantages are relatively rare outside some of the well-established commercial networks in the rich southeastern region (170). To add to Protestantism’s attraction, new converts are not required to make any donations,

and their weekly services generally involve singing, a sermon on the meaning of a scripture passage, prayer, and confession—none of which require money (Zheng 235). Furthermore, since many of these churches in rural areas lack a pastor and an actual church, they have no expenses for their support and upkeep. Instead, people within the community volunteer to preach, and they often gather in a local Protestant family's home to worship (233).

Despite Protestantism's inexpensive nature, the religion likely would not have been as successful in China's rural areas if it had not been to adapt itself to the local culture. Hunter and Chan note that in rural areas, Protestantism is "closely related to traditional cultural practices" (Hunter and Chan 188), and that the believers' emphasize topics such as faith healing and the supernatural often makes their belief more "a reflection of traditional cultural patterns" than of Christianity (Bays 190). Indeed, a large part of Christianity's success may come from the fact that belief in it only "requires a reorientation rather than a rejection of the past," since a "congruency" exists between Protestantism and traditional beliefs (Hunter and Chan 171).

Furthermore, sermons generally focus on topics such as filial piety, forbearance, and obedience, all of which are mainstays of traditional Chinese culture (Janz 146). For example, a hymn that members of one rural church composed reflects traditional emphasis on family harmony; it includes lines such as: "We urge daughters-in-law to listen carefully and don't quarrel with your parents-in-law, for the Lord will help you live a long and happy life and have a daughter-in-law just like yourself, a person with a good name" (Luo 97). This willingness to adapt to traditional customs, along with its inexpensive nature, has no doubt added to this "foreign" religion's appeal.

	Village	County	Small City	Suburban, Small City	Large City	Suburban, Large City
Buddhists	84.1%	2.7%	4.7%	1.6%	5.4%	1.6%
Protestants	65.7%	0.0%	5.7%	14.3%	11.4%	2.9%
Catholics	68.8%	0.0%	12.5%	6.2%	12.5%	0.0%
Non-religious	68.4%	4.4%	8.9%	6.6%	8.0%	3.8%

Analysis of this question takes on many layers, the first of which is the location of believers. The majority of the 1993 survey’s respondents, regardless of whether or not they are religious, live in rural villages; out of the three religions, however, more Buddhists live in these rural areas than do Protestants, Catholics, or the non-religious. Indeed, a higher percentage Christians—11.4% of Protestants and 12.5% of Catholics—reside in large cities than do any other groups of people, religious or not. Such statistics indicate that Protestantism’s growth in the countryside may not have been as pronounced as some scholars claim. On the other hand, a question about the “type of permanent household registration” the respondents hold reveals that a high percentage of both Buddhists [89.9%] and Protestants [82.4%] hold rural household registrations, which implies that a much higher percentage of Protestants have left their rural villages and become part of the migrant population. Unfortunately, this question fails to prove the validity of this hypothesis, since no other questions indicate whether the migrants converted before or after leaving their rural villages. Furthermore, a statistically relevant relationship exists only for Protestants in relation to household registration: the analysis confirms that, when controlling for all other variables, they are indeed more likely than the rest of the population to have rural household registration. For the rest of the religions, however, no such relationship exists, meaning that the household registration

trends for Buddhists and Catholics are remarkably similar to those of the non-religious, as is the rural-urban divide for all three religions.

Table 7: Estimated Economic Situation of Religious Believers					
	Very poor	Poor	Fair	Rich	Very rich
Buddhists	5.8%	18.9%	53.3%	22.0%	0.0%
Protestants	17.1%	34.3%	37.1%	8.6%	2.9%
Catholics	0.0%	20.0%	60.0%	13.3%	6.7%
Non-religious	6.6%	18.2%	50.4%	23.6%	1.2%

The other two aspects of this hypothesis—that Protestantism’s attraction is largely due to its inexpensive and adaptive nature—are harder to test. Interestingly, however, an examination of the respondents’ economic status reveals that out of believers in the three religions as well as the non-religious, a far higher percentage of Protestants are “poor” or “very poor”—indeed, 51.4% of them are described in this manner, compared with only 24.7% of Buddhists, 20% of Catholics, and 24.8% of the non-religious. While this question can hardly reveal the motivations behind the Protestants’ religious conversion, the majority of Protestants being poor does lend credence to this hypothesis. On the other hand, regression analysis shows that little correlation exists between economic standing and religious belief, even for Protestants. Belief in religion, therefore, has few ties to either economic status or location. Nonetheless, the 2005 survey once again reiterates religion’s attraction to people living in poor, backwards areas of the country, especially to those who “depend on the elements to survive,” though it unfortunately does not specify which religion holds the most appeal to these people (Sun).²⁰

²⁰ The phrase “depend on the elements to survive” is a translation of the Chinese idiom “靠天吃饭.”

Conclusion

Analysis of these nine hypotheses has produced a startling conclusion: the religious in China are, on the whole, very similar to the non-religious. Despite some variations in the statistics of the two groups, regression analysis shows that when all other variables are held constant, very little correlation exists between religious belief and factors such as age, gender, years of education, and economic status. Many of the hypotheses, therefore, are not so much proved or disproved as rendered irrelevant. While many of the hypotheses may explain a small portion of the religious population's reasons for conversion, none of them provide an overarching explanation for China's recent religious growth, and as a result, neither of the two theories is substantiated. In contrast, the 2005 survey gives more weight to the first theory, arguing that the majority of people converted for spiritual and psychological reasons. Regardless, analysis of these hypotheses shows that no individual explanation for the rise in religious belief among the Chinese population exists.

Table 8: Multinomial Logistic Regression Analysis of the Three Religions				
	Buddhis m	Protestantis m	Catholicis m	Other
Under age 39	0.361 (0.276)	-1.247 (.689)*	0.318 (1.481)	0.299 (0.555)
Over age 55	0.213 (0.361)	-0.536 (1.031)	-16.072 (6541.516)	-0.067 (0.741)
Male	0.112 (0.227)	-0.995 (0.682)	-0.067 (1.367)	0.203 (0.476)
Interview location	0.029 (0.093)	0.174 (0.207)	-1.381 (1.320)	-0.474 (0.292)
Household registration	-0.442 (0.373)	-2.022 (-1.068)*	0.353 (2.721)	1.596 (-0.785)**
Family economic situation	-0.092 (0.144)	-0.205 (0.448)	-1.012 (0.834)	-0.546 (0.277)**
Education by years	-0.071 (-0.038)*	-0.030 (0.110)	0.072 (0.228)	-0.093 (0.078)

If living with spouse	0.001 (0.132)	-14.361 0.000	-0.120 (1.036)	-0.234 (0.327)
Family members living together	0.097 (0.067)	-0.219 (0.255)	-0.338 (0.500)	0.301 (-0.106)**
Number of good friends	-0.003 (0.014)	-0.143 (0.109)	-0.059 (0.177)	0.016 (0.018)
Children obey parents	0.337 (.193)*	-0.285 (0.588)	0.709 (1.156)	0.073 (0.400)
Wife should obey mother-in-law	-0.420 (.191)**	-0.880 (0.561)	-1.702 (1.305)	-0.503 (0.387)
Son better than daughter	0.326 (.175)*	-0.612 (0.588)	-1.479 (1.332)	-0.150 (0.360)
Like United States	-0.159 (0.173)	0.370 (0.555)	0.082 (0.958)	-0.266 (0.375)
Like Germany	0.385 (.181)**	-0.567 (0.619)	0.829 (1.069)	0.096 (0.392)
Pace of political reform	-0.250 (0.189)	-0.055 (0.560)	1.008 (0.837)	0.056 (0.396)
Pace of social reform	-0.007 (0.196)	-0.686 (0.665)	-2.778 (-1.612)*	0.444 (0.383)
Trust and obey government	-0.711 (.279)**	0.737 (0.757)	1.476 (1.291)	0.975 (0.495)**
Unconditionally support government	0.646 (.285)**	0.143 (0.769)	0.888 (1.339)	-0.307 (0.498)
Party and state gave me everything	-0.496 (.256)*	-0.800 (0.700)	-1.350 (1.176)	-0.652 (0.510)
<p>Note: If the variable was significant at 5%, it is noted with **. If it was significant at 10%, it is noted with *. (Standard errors in parentheses). The co-efficients for the intercept are not shown.</p>				

CONCLUSION

Why have more and more people in China become religious since Deng Xiaoping began his reforms in 1978? An important factor is that religion, at that time, resumed after a period when all outward religious expression had been outlawed. Even today—thirty years later—the number of Buddhist monks and nuns is nowhere near its pre-1949 levels. Despite having the largest number of followers of any of the five official religions, Buddhism has remained relatively static and has not experienced the remarkable increase in membership numbers that Protestantism has (Hunter and Chan 226). Indeed, some estimate that Protestants now number over one hundred million, which would be at least a one hundredfold increase over pre-1949 levels. Even if this number is a wild exaggeration, Protestantism's growth has been undeniable.

The changes in the other three religions—Catholicism, Daoism, and Islam—have been unremarkable in comparison, though I have included a study of Catholicism due to it being, at least in the Western mind, closely linked with Protestantism. After all, many of the hypotheses that apply to Protestantism—the idea that people are attracted to Christianity due to its ties to the West,²¹ for example, or that Christianity's group-oriented worship appeal to those who lonely²²—often apply to Catholicism as well. Although the other religions have not experienced Protestantism's level of growth, the religious now make up over 30% of the Chinese population, a number that is especially startling given the degree of destruction all religions experienced during the Cultural

²¹ Hypothesis seven.

²² Hypothesis four.

Revolution and earlier government campaigns, not to mention the fact that the CCP continues to espouse atheism.

Recognizing the amount of progress that the various religions have made over the last thirty years, however, still does not answer the question of why this growth has occurred and why religion is appealing to so many people. Furthermore, while scholars and journalists alike offer a wide variety of ideas about what kinds of people find religion especially appealing, very few appear to have used hard data to reach their conclusions.²³ The data that they do use generally comes from limited surveys involving small areas such as one city or a single university, none of which are valid representations of the Chinese population as a whole. This lack of more complete data is understandable considering the tight control the Chinese government maintains over religion, but we have no way of knowing if their assertions are, in fact, valid. In the second part of this thesis, therefore, I have used data from the *1993 Survey on Social Mobility and Social Change in China*, which provides a probability sample of the Chinese population at that time, along with the results from a 2005 survey conducted by professors at East China Normal University, to attempt to determine the soundness these hypotheses. These individual hypotheses generally fall under one of two theories explaining basic reasons why people begin to believe in religion: they may turn to religion out of personal needs, or they may have had social influence that makes them more inclined to believe. The hypotheses themselves span a wide range of issues including gender discrimination, Westernization, the so-called “ideological void,” and levels of education.

²³ The notable exceptions I found were Hunter and Chan’s book, as well as the one Luo edited. The professor in the Sun article, of course, also has access to data to back his claims. Unfortunately, none of the data from their surveys appear to be available to the public.

Analysis of the 1993 survey provides a basic profile of the average religious believer: regardless of which religion they follow, the faithful are generally young, female, have little education, and most often are from rural backgrounds. However, the Chinese population in general shares many of these characteristics and is largely young and from rural areas, with low levels of education. Many of the hypotheses, therefore, overemphasize the role such characteristics play in religious belief. Regression analysis merely confirms this conclusion, indicating that little differentiates the religious from the non-religious. While the individual hypotheses may explain why some people become religious, none provide a definitive explanation that applies to the religious as a whole. After all, each hypothesis that I have discussed, after all, involves only one aspect of religious belief, and no single reason can completely explain a person's reasons for faith. As Luo Zhufeng eloquently states, "These causes (of the persistence of religion) do not exist in isolation, but individually and laterally are interconnected, permeating each other and influencing each other in different degrees, both extensively and intensively" (110). The end result, however, is that neither the majority of the hypotheses nor the two overarching theories have been proved valid. Nonetheless, a far more important conclusion can be drawn from these analyses: since the religious are quite similar to the non-religious, the hypotheses are not so much valid or invalid as merely not applicable.

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